

Why We Need Israel

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And where is Mount Moriah today? Our tradition locates that mountain of fear and vision in the heart of Jerusalem. On that mountain the Bet HaMikdash, the holy Temple, stood for nearly one thousand years, and that mountain is home today to the Muslim Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, side by side with the Kotel, Judaism's sacred Western Wall. And a stones' throw away from them both is the Holy Sepulchre, where Jesus was purportedly buried and rose from the dead. If by some miracle Benjamin Netanyahu, Mahmoud Abbas and Hilary Clinton actually succeed where so many others have failed, and manage to produce a peace agreement leading to a two-state solution, the final and most difficult problem they will solve may be what to do about that mountain...upon which a father, a son, an angel and a ram began our religion almost four thousand years ago. Mount Moriah—mountain of yirah and r'iyah...fear and vision!

What is that place to us? We are here in Santa Barbara, on the other side of the planet. What is our connection to the Kotel, and its crowds of black-hatted Jews? What is our connection to the Old City of Jerusalem, with the tense alley-ways of the Muslim Quarter and the tacky and commercialized Jewish Quarter? In fact, what is our connection with Israel? That country of traffic jams and tourist traps and lethal hatreds? Here in Santa Barbara, we live peacefully side by side with our non-Jewish neighbors. They share their parking lot with us on our High Holy Days, happily, free of charge!

Here we can pray as Jews, we can study Torah and teach our children, we can celebrate our Festivals and observe the Shabbat. We can keep kosher, if we want to, or not, without guilt or argument. Unlike Jews of ages past, we are free to live where we want, to attend the best universities, to practice any trade or business we choose. We no longer live in the old world of ghettos, pogroms, and persecutions. In fact, we Reform Jews can practice our Judaism more freely here in America than we can in Israel, where weddings and conversions and burial are all controlled by an increasingly rigid and fundamentalist Orthodox rabbinate. So why do we need Israel? How are we helped or in any way enriched by Israel and its bitter, apparently unending conflicts...both internal and with its neighbors?

Is it that Jews are safer there? No, they're not.

Is it that God is more present there? No. *M'lo chol ha'aretz kvodo*. God's glory fills the entire world.

To the question of why we need Israel, I know only one answer.

In Israel, we find the Jewish People. In America, for reasons both good and bad, Judaism works as a religion, but we are losing our sense of peoplehood. America is the land of rugged individualism, and here we have thrived as individuals....but at the expense of our old Jewish sense of inter-connectedness. We are losing our sense of shared destiny, the conviction that our lives are bound up with each other. In Israel, with all its conflicts and troubles, the Jewish people is vibrantly alive.

Anyone who has spent time in Israel has their own stories about this. Years ago, when I was a rabbinic student in Jerusalem, my college roommate came to stay with me.

He promptly fell in love with the checkout girl at the supermarket, and resolved to ask her out on a date! (she knew no English and he knew no Hebrew.) He went to the market, waited in line, and then when he reached the checkout, began to ask her out...as best he could. As soon as the people of Jerusalem standing behind him in line realized what was going on, ...they all got involved! Offering advice, suggestions for where they should go on their date, and so forth. They were complete strangers to him, but being Israelis, they saw him as family, and were compelled to intervene exactly as they would for a young cousin or nephew. Here in America, people may be friendly, but we cherish our privacy. We Jews may help each other, when we can, but we maintain our distance from each other. To remember what it means to be family, we need Israel.

Four years ago a group of us from CBB travelled together to Israel, and came to a community center in Tel Aviv for young people from Ethiopia. One of the Ethiopian teenagers asked our group why we had come to visit Israel. One of our members, Paula, spoke up and explained that she had recently converted to Judaism and that this trip was part of deepening her connection to Judaism and to the Jewish people. After I translated Paula's answer, the girl who had asked the question, her skin as black as the night...she herself had arrived in Israel only a few years earlier... looked straight at Paula and said to her in Hebrew, "I would like to say that I have deep respect for your decision to become a Jew, and I welcome you into our Jewish people." Paula began to weep. That was why we traveled all the way to Israel. For the sake of that moment.

We know that the sense of shared, collective destiny in Israel is rooted squarely in the geo-political reality. Since its founding, Israel has been surrounded by hostile neighbors. Israelis know that they are bound existentially to each other. That knowledge is brought home for every family in the reality of universal military service. While there are some controversial exceptions, in general every young man and woman enters the army at 18 years of age....right out of high school. Every young man and woman. Every family has its soldier; every parent knows that their child may one day be called to go into battle. This is the price of being an Israeli citizen.

Compare that, for a moment, to our situation here. To raise a Jewish child in Santa Barbara means to write a check to the synagogue, to arrange your family's schedule so that Hebrew lessons can fit in between soccer, ballet and homework. And to drag your child out of bed on Sunday morning for 7 years. It's not easy...I know that, first hand! But it pales in comparison to the price Jewish parents pay to raise a child in Israel.

Nowadays, many American Jews choose not to affiliate with a synagogue at all. For them being a Jew costs.....nothing. It's an option now, to be Jewish but detached from Jewish community. So now our people ask a new and a very American question when they consider joining a synagogue: "What do I get as a member?" It is a completely reasonable question....but it highlights the fact that we are living in a new Jewish reality. Judaism and our Jewish community ask almost nothing of us. And when faced with the decision of whether or not to affiliate, we ask the great American question: what is in it for me? We need Israel to bring us back to the infinitely more meaningful question: what does my people need from me?

There is a dark side, we all know, to passionate group identification, sometimes called tribalism. A tribe can become coercive. A tribe may be insensitive to individual needs and may be intolerant of idiosyncracies or of dissent. Members of a tribe may too

quickly come to see members of other tribes as their enemies. Racism and bigotry are enormous problems in Israel, just as they are still here in the US. They are the dark side of passionate group loyalty. Over the years many of our best and brightest Jews have said to me, "I am proud to be Jewish, but I'm not really into joining anything...." They distrust the experience of being in a group...for good reasons.

But there is also a dark side to radical individualism. A story is told in Midrash Leviticus Rabbah, from the 4th century in Palestine: a group of travelers were on a boat out at sea. Not long after they had lost sight of land, and were far out in the heart of the sea, they began to hear an unfamiliar whirring sound and they looked in every direction to see what might be causing it. Maybe it was a dolphin or some strange sea bird. To their amazement, they discovered that the sound was coming from inside their boat...it was one of their group, a taciturn fellow, sitting alone, who was quietly, patiently, methodically drilling a hole in the floor of the boat under his seat! They gasped in horror, not able to believe their eyes, and the group all shouted at him: "What are you doing?! You'll sink the boat!" To which he responded, "Hey, I paid good money for this seat; if I choose to drill under my seat, it has nothing to do with any of you!"

That midrash was written 1500 years ago, in ancient Palestine, but it feels like it has been waiting all that time just for us...the intensely private and individualistic Jews of the United States. The Israelis know, in a way that we do not, that they are all in a boat together. They understand the wisdom of what it means to be bound existentially together...and a deep encounter with Israel can awaken that wisdom within us.

About traveling to Israel: sadly, it is possible for an American Jew to travel to Israel and never really meet an Israeli. The easiest tour for the travel agencies to organize, and the most comfortable for the tourist, is kind of like ten days at Disneyland. The standard rides include floating in the Dead Sea, riding the cable car up Masada, crawling through the caves of Bet Guvrin, standing in front of the stones of the Kotel, visiting the model of the second Temple and in general seeing a lot of archeology, rocks, and relics...much of it in a stunning natural setting.

As interesting and beautiful as they may be, the standard tourist sites teach us nothing about being in that Israeli boat. The golden stones of Jerusalem reveal nothing to us of what it means to be part of a living people, nothing about what it means to be a Jew. When we go to Israel, we should take a little time for the rocks and the rides, but our main objective should be to meet the people. To ask them about their lives, and how they feel about their country, and what it means to them to be Jewish. It is for those conversations that we need Israel and our Israeli family...because they have a wisdom that we have lost.

Once a year, we catch a glimpse of that wisdom here in Santa Barbara. We are here this morning for a gathering of the family. Our children and our elders. The believers and the skeptics. Prosperous uncles and struggling cousins. Jewish mothers and non-Jewish sons and daughters-in-law. The whole family is here, called together by the ram's horn, the one voice that still has the power to awaken the old family feelings. As you listen to the horn this morning, close your eyes and listen to the more distant shofars. Shofars are blowing all over the world today, calling us back to the family.

V'haya bayom hahu, yitaka b'shofar gadol... Long ago, the prophet Isaiah dreamt of one shofar that would be heard all over the world.

And on that day, a great shofar will sound, and there will return—the ten lost tribes and the exiles who have wandered to Egypt and to Spain, to Poland and New York and even to Santa Barbara, California. They all will come, and worship God on the holy mountain, *Yerushalayim*. Jerusalem.

There on the mountain where the story began, with a father and his son, an angel and a ram, we will remember once again what it means to be family. L'shanah tova tikateivu.